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ABSTRACT

The report provides an overview of bilingual education in California. It begins with recent data on demographic trends in the state, particularly among elementary and secondary students, the rate of increase in enrollment of limited-English-speaking (LEP) students, first languages of LEP students, and the family's influence in English language learning. State and federal requirements for schools' provision of services to LEP students are examined, noting some new state policies for English language instruction. Bilingual education is defined, and four approaches to it are described: instruction primarily in the first language; specially-designed English instruction with first-language support; sheltered immersion, or special content instruction in English; and full immersion in English-language classrooms. The role of the teacher and of teacher qualifications in improving bilingual education and the costs of bilingual education are discussed briefly, and related research is summarized. Issues faced by both the state and the schools in making major policy decisions are outlined, and sources of further information are noted. Data on the characteristics of LEP students are graphed, including age distribution, first languages, instructional settings for English language learning, and the ten counties with the largest distribution of LEP students. (MSE)

Backgrounder: Bilingual Education in California

REPORT
May 1998

EdSource®

Clarifying Complex Education Issues

One-quarter of California's students are in the process of learning English. How best to teach them academic content as well as the new language is a complex challenge for schools.

EdSource thanks the James Irvine Foundation for investing in our work.

Backgrounder

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA

Ensuring that all California students learn both English and academic content is a huge challenge, and people have differing opinions about how to meet it.

The challenge is that almost a million and a half children attend public schools knowing little or no English. About 70% of them are in elementary grades, and over a million live in Spanish-speaking households.

The differences of opinion revolve around what teaching methods are most effective for English language learners. While much research informs this topic, its conclusiveness continues to be questioned. The discussion is also affected by political considerations and by an absence of clarity about what "bilingual education" is and how — given limited resources — school districts should provide it.

As the decade ends, schools face a formidable task, especially against the backdrop of a push for raising standards, new measures of student achievement, and unpredictable changes in law and policy.

English Learners Have Increased, and Most Speak Spanish

In the 1996-97 school year, almost a quarter of the kindergarten through twelfth grade students in this state could not function academically in English. These students have traditionally been described as Limited English Proficient (LEP); a more recent term is English Language Learner (ELL).

The number of students who need to learn English has more than doubled in the past ten years (see Figure 1). Not all of them are immigrants; some were born as American citizens to parents who are not fluent in English. Although nearly 40% are in Los Angeles County, the impact of the increase in non-English speaking pupils affects schools just about everywhere in the state.

Two-thirds of the current English language learners are in grades K through six — one out of three current kindergartners and first graders. The other third are in grades seven through twelve, a much smaller percentage of secondary school enrollment. The educational needs of these older students are quite different from young children who must learn to read as well as learn a new language.

Students who become able to do schoolwork in English are redesignated as Fully English Proficient (FEP). In California, the combination of LEP and FEP students accounts for almost 37% of total student enrollment.

Spanish is the first language of over 80% of the students who are learning English. With one exception, the eight next most frequently spoken languages are Asian, each at 1-3% of the total. The California Department of Education (CDE) recognizes 54 languages in data from its annual census and groups together another 100 languages and dialects.

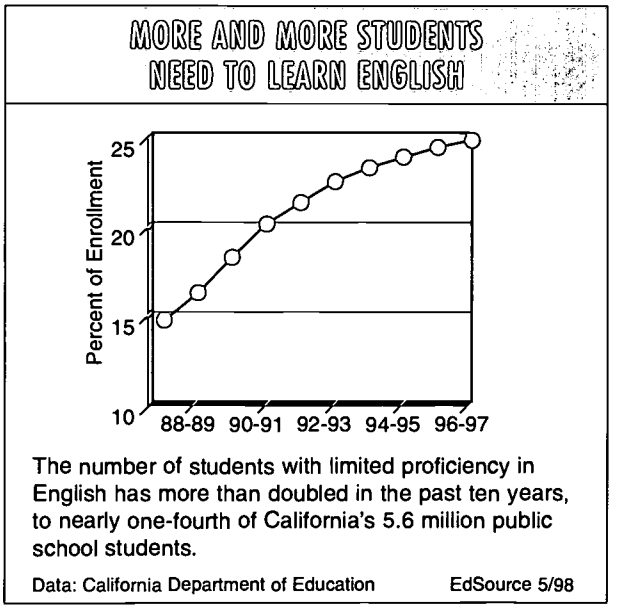
The family — its educational level, commitment to education, and language ability — has a strong effect on how well these students will function in school, as do the community's demographics and economics. The vast majority of English language learners are from families in poverty, and many are transient, with frequent interruptions in their schooling. The students' age and previous education, the attitude of the school, its resources, and the capabilities of the teachers are also critical to determining student performance in school.

The opportunity for achievement, and for failure, co-exist in today's schools for the students who face a new culture as well as a new language.

Schools Must Meet Federal and State Requirements

Federal laws and court decisions stemming from the 1964 Civil Rights Act required public schools to provide special services for English language learn-

Figure 1



The number of students with limited proficiency in English has more than doubled in the past ten years, to nearly one-fourth of California's 5.6 million public school students.

Data: California Department of Education EdSource 5/98

ers. The 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Lau* v. *Nichols* confirmed that schools must take "affirmative steps" to ensure equal educational opportunities to students who did not speak English. In many instances, this was interpreted as meaning some primary language instruction.

California's response, the Bilingual-Bicultural Education Act of 1976, expired in 1987. It has not yet been replaced, despite periodic attempts to do so. The federal regulations and state guidelines have continued, however, and school districts have responded in different ways.

NEW STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION POLICIES

In accordance with federal law as interpreted by the courts, the State Board of Education has new advisory principles for the instruction of English language learners. These permit each school district to:

- ☐ use any instructional method for these students based on "sound educational theory or a legitimate educational strategy"
- ☐ select the instructional program that will lead to the best results for students.

Districts should:

- ☐ provide "adequate resources and personnel" to support local programs
- ☐ involve parents, including getting their consent for placement in special programs
- ☐ follow due process in "all compliance matters."

The Board's goal is to ensure that students "rapidly develop English language proficiency" and to provide students with "an opportunity to learn, including access to a challenging core curriculum."

In April 1998, the State Board of Education adopted new bilingual policies that give school districts substantial flexibility to establish their own programs, within the federal guidelines. Districts may use "primary language instruction or any other specific methodology" as long as they show positive student results after a "reasonable period." In May 1998, new legislation awaited Governor Wilson's signature. If signed, it would give school districts discretion to choose their instructional program but would hold them accountable for students' progress in mastering English and academic subjects.

If approved by the voters, a June 1998 ballot measure, Proposition 227, would standardize the way non-English speaking students are taught. It would restrict instruction to a "sheltered English" approach and would limit students' time in such a classroom to one year in most cases. The eventual impact on California classrooms of the new policies and/or the ballot measure is an open question.

What is "Bilingual Education"?

Technically, "bilingual education" means instruction in two languages. As commonly used, however, it refers to a range of instruction provided to students who need to learn English. Services vary from specially tailored classes in English, to a little help in the student's primary language, to most academic instruction in that primary language.

How English Language Learners Are Currently Taught

The great variety of programs for teaching California students who do not know English well can be divided into four general categories, though what happens in classrooms is sometimes a mix of strategies.

1. Primary language instruction. Students are taught academic subjects mostly in their first language, with textbooks and classroom materials in that language and in English. Contrary to popular perception, fewer than 30% of all English language learners are in these "bilingual" classes. The overwhelming majority of them are Spanish-speaking, according to the CDE data.

2. Specially designed English instruction with primary language support. Instruction for these students is mostly in English, but some of it is in the students' native language. The special assistance from bilingual teachers or aides can be within a classroom or in pull-out classes during the school day or week. About 22% of ELL students are served by these programs, which include Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), in which the teaching methods and materials are tailored to help students develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English while learning academic content.

3. "Sheltered immersion" — special instruction in English. Nearly one-third of the students who need to learn English are in regular English-language classes with instruction geared to their proficiency. About 11% have English Language Development (ELD, formerly English as a Second Language) and about 20% have both ELD and SDAIE. Primary language support is not included.

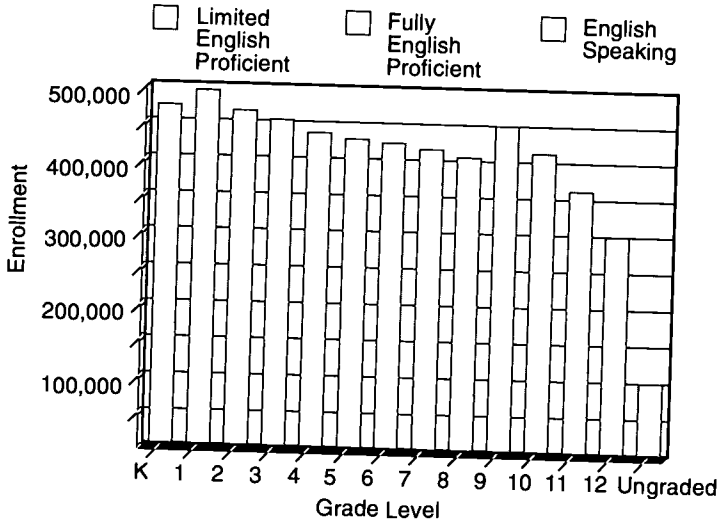
4. No special services. About 16% of the LEP students do not participate in any special programs. They are "fully immersed" in English-language classrooms (sometimes called "sink or swim"). Slightly over 1% have been withdrawn from special language assistance by parental request.

Some students are in special language assistance programs briefly, while others continue in them for as long as five years, though with increasing emphasis on instruction in English.

California has not monitored the academic progress statewide of English language learners. As a consequence, a statewide evaluation of the efforts to

WHO ARE THE CALIFORNIA STUDENTS WHO NEED TO LEARN ENGLISH?

MOST ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS ARE IN THE EARLY GRADES



Two-thirds of the students who do not yet know English are in grades K through 6, including one out of three current kindergartners and first graders.

Data: California Department of Education

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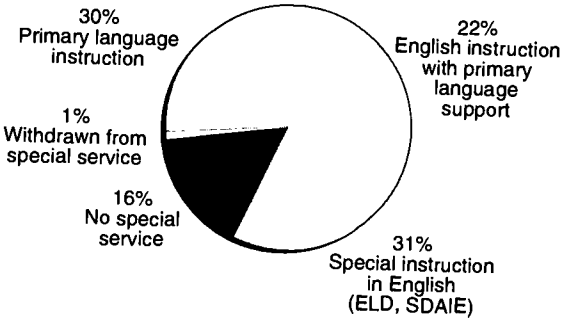
THEY LEARN IN A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT SETTINGS



Fewer than one-third of the students have instruction in their native language, and a fifth have some primary language support. The rest either have instruction geared to their level of English proficiency or are in regular English-language classes with no special assistance.

Data: California Department of Education

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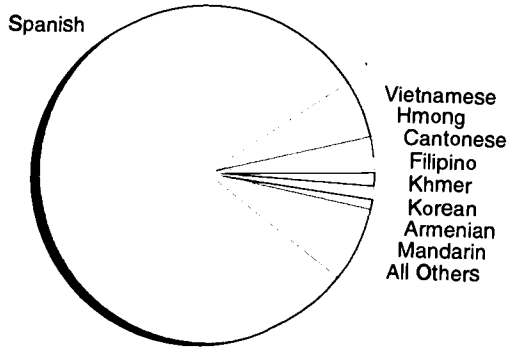
THEY ARE MOST LIKELY TO SPEAK SPANISH



Of over 150 languages and dialects in California schools, Spanish is the first language for four out of five of the students who are learning English. With the exception of Armenian, the next eight most usually spoken languages are Asian, and they account for about 14% of the students.

Data: California Department of Education

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THEY ATTEND SCHOOL THROUGHOUT CALIFORNIA

Top Ten Counties	% LEP, 1996-97
Imperial	47.7
Los Angeles	36.0
Monterey	33.9
Merced	32.8
Colusa	32.3
San Francisco	31.7
Orange	30.3
Madera	28.1
Fresno	27.3
Santa Cruz	27.0

Data: California Department of Education

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teach students with limited English proficiency has been somewhere between difficult and impossible.

The Teacher Is a Crucial Component

According to data from the CDE, in 1996-97 about 85,000 of the teachers who have a California teaching credential or are studying for one were trained in methods for instructing non-English speaking students. They had the help of over 30,000 instructional assistants.

Just under 15,000 of the 85,000 teachers have a special bilingual credential, and 9,000 teachers are in training for one. The ratio of bilingual teachers to students is one Spanish-speaking teacher for every 85 Spanish-speaking students (one per 49 including teachers in training). For Vietnamese-speaking students, it is one teacher per 889 students and for Russian, one per 6,700. An estimated 7,700 of the 30,000 instructional assistants are bilingual.

In 1996-97, over a third of the teachers working with ELL students were on emergency waivers, meaning that they had not completed work for the appropriate credential. The number of teachers with multicultural, multilingual training has been increasing recently, in part through Cross-cultural, Language, and Academic Development (CLAD) and related B-CLAD (for Bilingual) certification programs.

Whether or not teachers need the special CLAD or B-CLAD training is the subject of lively discussion, but no one doubts the important role of a skilled and caring teacher in helping these students succeed.

The Costs Are Unclear

Over $836 million in federal support is targeted in 1997-98 to California for educationally and economically disadvantaged students, including those who do not know English, $107.5 million for migrant education, and $32.5 million for "emergency immigrant education." The money is distributed to districts according to formulas that reflect their socioeconomic makeup. How much of that support is spent directly on students who are learning English is not currently reported.

The state's Economic Impact Aid allocation for 1997-98 is $385 million for students who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. It is distributed according to a formula that counts certain students but is not linked to the cost of services for them. The California Department of Finance has estimated that as much as 70% of the state money is used for programs for students who are learning English. Some districts find money from other special purpose programs, and they may use discretionary funds from state or local sources. Districts do not currently have to identify their expenditures for English language learners.

What About Research?

Although much has been learned about successful programs for students who are learning English, disagreements among educators, researchers, parents, and other non-educators persist. Critics say that students are not learning English fast or well enough. Others believe it takes time to become sufficiently proficient in a language to comprehend rigorous content matter and therefore succeed in academic subjects. Still others say the problem in many schools is the lack of human and financial resources or the commitment needed to replicate the good programs. No single way appears to work equally well for all students in all circumstances.

Some consensus (but not unanimity) exists on a few topics:

- ☐ Young students can move easily between two languages; they learn faster (especially reading) when they have a strong base in their primary language. Being taught in their native language for four or five years often puts these students behind their peers in reading and writing English. A 1997 National Research Council (NRC) report states that the most effective programs, no matter what their labels, include some native language instruction, an early phase-in of instruction in English, and teachers who are trained to work with students learning English.
- ☐ Because of the large number of languages in California schools, primary language support to all English language learners is impractical and often impossible. Instruction for these students has to be in English.
- ☐ The high dropout rate among Hispanic students is not linked to bilingual education programs; many dropouts grew up speaking English.
- ☐ Children of higher income, educated parents learn English and academic subjects faster, no matter what their language abilities when they begin school.
- ☐ The NRC report concludes that bilingualism — literacy in two languages — has a slight positive, and no negative, effect on "the overall linguistic, cognitive, or social development of children" when socioeconomic factors are taken into consideration.

As a March 1997 article in *Education Week* noted, the question to ask is not whether "bilingual education" works, or works better than alternatives. The better option is to explore what specific instructional strategies help English language learners most, under what conditions, for which children, and what is next best if the ideal conditions for replication do not exist.

The State and Schools Face Major Policy Decisions

An important issue in the discussion of how best to teach students who need to learn English is accountability: how to measure their progress fairly, as well as when and to what extent they should be expected to meet grade-level academic standards. The hope is that a statewide focus on what students know and are able to do would shift the debate from pedagogy to results.

After years of no data on student achievement, California expects to have baseline results in June 1998 from a new standardized statewide test for all second through eleventh graders. Students who do not know English may be tested in their native language if such a test exists. However, over the protests of many school districts and court challenges, the law requires ELL students to take the English-language test even if they are not able to read the test questions. The purpose of this requirement was to assure that statewide test results reflect a complete picture of the performance of all of California's students, no matter what their backgrounds. Results by school and district must be posted on the Internet by July 1998.

Most experts say that multiple measures will have to be used to accurately assess ELL students — and most students. Student achievement data is also expected, over time, to provide some information about the most effective approaches to educating English language learners. However, getting both critics and supporters of an existing program to agree on what constitutes fair and objective measures of school and program effectiveness can be extremely difficult.

Whatever programs are planned, schools must build their capacity to implement them. Irrespective of California policy, the federal requirements remain. The challenge for the teaching profession is immense. Critical to that is expanding the pool of teachers who are themselves bilingual, in other languages as well as in Spanish. This task is more difficult than ever because of growing school enrollments and additional K-3 classrooms created by the class size reduction program, which have caused a serious shortage of teachers. Primary language instruction aside, concern persists about how many teachers have mastered the techniques that best help English language learners.

Finally, Californians must decide who should be in charge of selecting the programs that schools will use to teach students who need to learn English.

- ☐ How does local flexibility interact with state and federal law as well as court precedent?
- ☐ What regulations, if any, should accompany funding?
- ☐ To what extent should these regulations specify the methods that teachers may or must use?

The challenge of effectively educating children who do not come to school speaking English often seems overwhelming, particularly in California. It is also vital. This state's ability to meet the challenge is being watched by the rest of the nation.

Federal requirements, state laws and policies, and local school board decisions will all be part of charting the course California takes. The future of "bilingual education" will directly affect one out of four public school students and have a significant impact on almost every school in the state. Eventually, it will also help determine the economic vitality of the state and the future quality of life for every Californian.

TO LEARN MORE

A vast amount of information is available about bilingual education. For a sample, contact the following:

Organizations

CDE Bilingual Education Network (BiEN), www.cde.ca.gov/cilbranch/bien/bien.htm

California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE), 660 S. Figueroa, #1040, Los Angeles 90017-3464, 213/532-3850

National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), 1220 L Street NW, #605, Woshington, DC 20005, www.nabe.org

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, www.ncbe.gwu.edu

Articles and Reports

Education Week, 6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100, Bethesda, MD 20814-5233, 301/280-3200, www.edweek.org.

WestEd, 730 Harrison Street, San Francisco, CA 94107, 415/565-3000, www.wested.org/policy.

More data is provided by the Demographics Unit of the California Department of Education, www.cde.ca.gov. Information about school districts and individual schools is at www.ed-data.k12.ca.us. To learn more about specific programs, contact your local school or school district office.

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4151 Middlefield Rd.
Suite 100
Palo Alto, CA
94303-4743
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